

1990 - The Year In Review TV's Leading News Topics

During 1990 we monitored 13,768 news stories broadcast on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news. We also logged 3025 jokes about public affairs from monologues on the "Tonight Show", "Late Night with David Letterman," and the "Arsenio Hall Show." This annual review issue of *Media Monitor* chronicles the leading news topics and targets of political humor on television during 1990. It also contains an in-depth report on the biggest TV news story of 1990, the crisis in the Persian Gulf.

Major findings:

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■ **Big News** The Gulf Crisis produced 2334 stories, nearly half of all TV news airtime since August - the most intensive coverage we have ever logged.

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■ **Non-News** German reunification, the war on drugs, and the savings and loan crisis all failed to make the top ten list of news topics.

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■ **Vote News** 1990 mid-term election news was more negative and less balanced than in 1988. Republican candidates fared worse than Democrats.

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■ **Peace News** Most sources opposed U.S. military action in the Persian Gulf and criticized U.S. Gulf policy.

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■ **Punchlines** Dan Quayle edged out George Bush and Saddam Hussein as the most joked-about newsmaker on late-night TV in 1990.

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Newswatch

During 1990 13,768 news stories were broadcast on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening news shows. The ten most heavily covered news topics accounted for a majority (54%) of the entire news hole. Five of last year's top ten topics remained on this year's list. In fact the USSR (second), the economy (third), and crime (fifth) retained their 1989 rankings. Dropping out of the top ten were Eastern Europe, China, drugs, aviation safety and Panama. (Our tally is based on substantive topics, so it doesn't include institutional "beats" like the Presidency and the Congress. For example, a story about congressional reaction to events in the Soviet Union would be included under USSR coverage.)

The Top Ten

#1 Persian Gulf In only five months the Gulf crisis generated 2334 TV news stories, the most intensive coverage of a news event that we have ever logged. An in-depth report begins on page five.

#2 USSR The 1320 stories devoted to the Soviet Union far surpassed the coverage devoted to 1989's number one topic, Eastern Europe (972 stories). The primary focus was on Soviet relations with the United States (251 stories), including the three summits between Presidents Gorbachev and Bush. Internal turmoil was also heavily covered, as several Soviet Republics asserted their independence. Lithuania alone was the subject of 199 stories. The political arena was another major source of Soviet news, as reforms and government shake-ups were frequently reported (147 stories). Economic difficulties and food shortages also attracted a substantial amount of coverage (105 stories). USSR coverage will be analyzed in depth in a forthcoming issue of *Media Monitor*.

#3 Economy/Business Short news pieces reporting on the state of economic indicators led the coverage with 68 stories, followed by more in-depth reports on such substantive issues as the banking industry (55), the prospect of a recession (43), and inflation (37).

#4 Health Issues Efforts to find cures for AIDS and other diseases provided the primary focus of health news (77 stories). The harmful effects of smoking, including controversies over cigarette advertising, also received heavy coverage (51 news reports). Rounding out this topic were reports on new medicines (44 stories), health problems facing children (36), and cancer (27).

#5 Crime America's law and order problem remained high on the media agenda in 1990, as stories on murders or homicide statistics were aired 86 times. High profile crimes, including Washington D.C. Mayor Marion Barry's drug arrest (55 stories), also made news. Other frequent topics were the death penalty (19 stories), child abuse (18) and rape (14).

#6 South Africa Political changes, including the release of black activist Nelson Mandela from prison, made South Africa a major story in 1990 (See *Media Monitor*, Aug/Sept 1990). The apartheid system and its reform generated by far the most news (166 stories). Relations with the U.S. produced 61 reports, as both President De Klerk and Nelson Mandela visited the United States.

#7 Disaster/Accidents News of natural disasters was led by 59 stories on fires, including forest fires, industrial fires, and a fire aboard a Swedish ferry. Close behind was news of floods (58 stories), primarily in the southern and northwestern United States.

#8 Budget The 1990 federal budget attained unusual prominence as partisan battle lines were drawn over taxes. Coverage of the federal deficit led the way with 99 reports. Congressional debate over the budget package produced 55 stories, while the White House's role was the subject of 33.

#9 Environment Earth Day festivities sparked heavy coverage of the environment -- 38 stories appeared during the week before Earth Day. Pollution topped all environmental topics with 74 news reports. Oil spills were the focus of an additional 59 stories. The plight of animals in our changing environment was a third major topic with 45 stories. Environmental news was the subject of the April 1990 *Media Monitor*.

#10 Israel Israel's ranking in the top ten 1990 news topics is another indication of the growing

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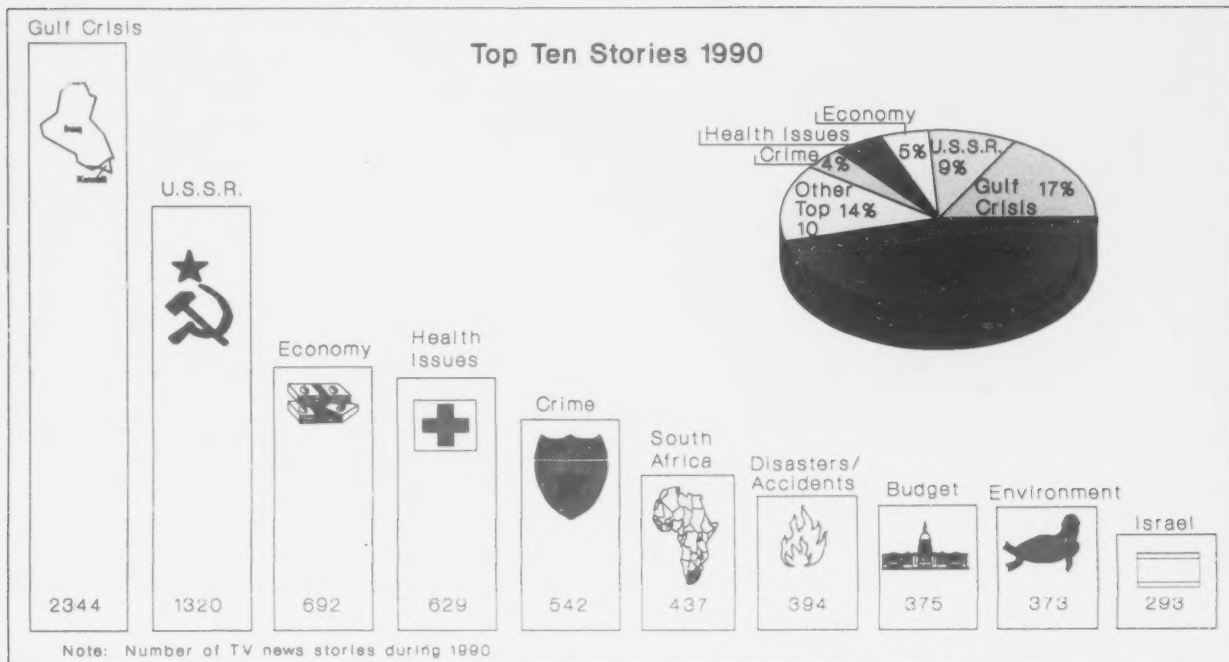
tensions in the Middle East. Spurred by the Temple Mount killings, the Palestinian issue received heavy news coverage (82 stories). Strains in U.S.-Israeli relations provided the other major focal point of the coverage (53 stories).

The three networks followed similar news agendas on most major topics. NBC broke from the pack on three stories: NBC devoted less coverage to the environment than its competitors, airing only 86 stories, compared to 142 on ABC and 145 on CBS. By contrast, NBC offered the heaviest coverage of Germany, with 111 stories (vs. 88 on ABC and 69 on CBS); and on illegal drugs, with 94 stories (vs. 71 on ABC and 50 on CBS).

previous German states) was the subject of only 268 news reports in 1990, compared to 327 stories on East Germany alone in 1989.

News coverage of the war on drugs dropped by almost 60%, from 518 stories in 1989 to only 215 stories in 1990. The savings and loan scandal also failed to attract heavy coverage. The 168 stories on this topic were aimed most frequently at the "Keating Five" (the five U.S. Senators charged with improprieties).

Finally, television's 1990 campaign coverage demonstrated the medium's lack of interest in mid-term elections. Only 170 stories were aired on the 1990 state and federal contests, compared with 2201 stories on the 1988 presidential contest. The tone of 1990 election coverage was



The News That Wasn't

The 1990 TV news agenda was also notable for some stories that did not make the top ten list. The most noteworthy of these was German reunification, which marked the official end of Europe's cold war division. Despite this story's historic significance, Germany (including both

more negative and less balanced than in 1988. That year both presidential candidates received about twice as much criticism as praise from on-air sources. This time around Democratic candidates collectively received two to one negative coverage, but Republicans fared much worse - seven to one negative. The heaviest coverage went to the North Carolina Senate race (Jesse Helms vs. Harvey Gantt), but Republicans fared worse than Democrats in coverage of congressional, senatorial and gubernatorial races.

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Punchlines

During 1990 researchers logged all jokes about public affairs or public figures by late-night comedians Johnny Carson, Arsenio Hall, Jay Leno and David Letterman. The most frequently joked about topics and individuals in the 3025 jokes are listed in the accompanying tables.

Topics

Iraq: The weather in Iraq is changing...the temperature at night can go below 32 degrees. I guess hell really can freeze over. (Leno 12/4/90)

Environment: Exxon had another spill...off the coast of New Jersey and the environmentalists were back today cleaning the oil off the syringes. (Carson 1/3) Good news, June Allyson has switched to cloth diapers. (Letterman 4/24)

Savings and Loans: A guy held up the Silverado Savings and Loan yesterday and got away with over a million dollars of IOU's. (Leno 9/4) They say there's no recession, but Charles Keating had to lay off two Senators today. (Leno 12/17)

Personal Jokes - 1990

1. Dan Quayle	162
2. George Bush	147
3. Saddam Hussein	137
4. Marion Barry	83
5. Ronald Reagan	65
6. Mikhail Gorbachev	64
7. Manuel Noriega	56
8. David Souter	37
9. Neil Bush	17
10. Jim & Tammy Bakker	16

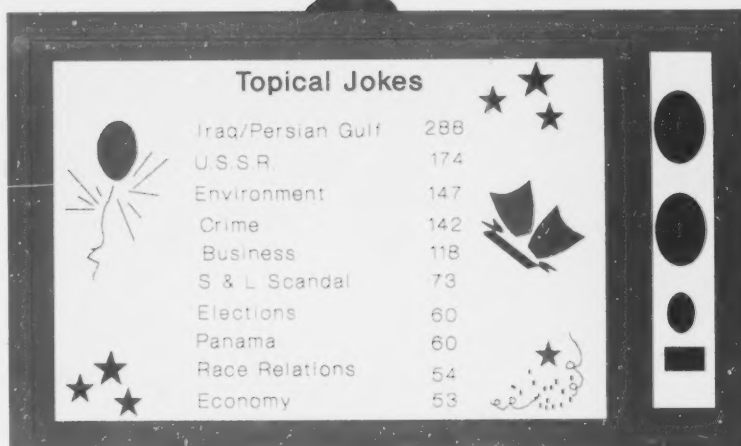
Individuals

Dan Quayle:

*President Bush signed an executive order that raised Vice President Quayle's salary. Quayle's getting more money, provided he makes his bed and mows the lawn. (Carson 12/13)

*Even though he wasn't on the ballot, NBC News is still projecting Dan Quayle as a loser. (Letterman 11/7)

*Do you think Dan Quayle ever jokes about smart people? (Hall 11/09)



George Bush:

*Ladies and gentlemen, it's 12:30. Do you know where your President stands on raising taxes for the wealthy? (Letterman 10/12)

*Sonny Bono announced he may run for the U.S. Senate. We've got a bonehead in the White House, why not a Bono in Congress? (Hall 11/14)

Saddam Hussein:

*The Zsa Zsa Gabor of the Middle East (Hall, 8/3)

*Replaced George Steinbrenner as the world's most hated man (Carson, 8/3)

*The stupidest guy to control oil since Jed Clampett (Hall, 11/30)

*The hardest working tyrant in show business (Letterman, 11/30)

Prelude to War Television News Coverage of the Persian Gulf Crisis

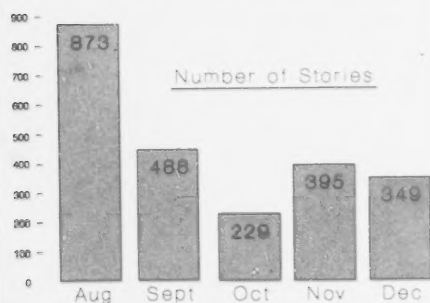
The Big Story

The crisis in the Persian Gulf was by far the biggest TV news story of 1990. From August 2 (when Iraq invaded Kuwait) through December 31, the network evening newscasts broadcast 2,334 stories on the Gulf crisis. Nearly half of all airtime on the evening news (46%) was devoted to Gulf coverage during the last five months of 1990. CBS led the pack, spending 22 hours 17 minutes reporting and analyzing the crisis. ABC aired 21 hours 26 minutes of Gulf coverage, and NBC provided 20 hours 26 minutes of crisis news. (The substantive analysis that follows is based on the newscasts from August 2 through November 30, 1990).

Hail to the Chief?

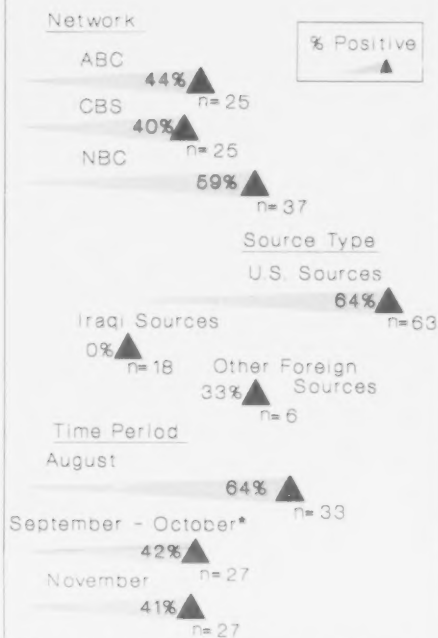
President Bush received his best press in August, when nearly two out of three news sources voiced support or praise for the President's handling of the crisis. Thereafter,

Gulf Coverage Over Time



almost three out of five sources criticized Bush's role. The growth of an anti-war movement was one reason for the increased criticism. One protest leader read an open letter to Bush on NBC: "I'm afraid that...you will wager my son's life in a gamble to save your political future." (NBC 11/30)

Rating Presidential Performance



* 24 evaluations in September; 3 in October.

Note: Opinions on President Bush's handling of the Gulf crisis includes all sources on ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news, 8/2 through 11/30.

The growing visibility of Iraqi government officials is another reason why Bush's favorable press ratio dropped. Iraqi sources appeared on the evening news 18 times to criticize Bush's handling of the crisis. Typical was the Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister, who said that "George Bush is leading the world to a ruinous war that could last years." (NBC 11/28) In contrast, nearly two out of three American sources (64%) praised Bush. For example, an American hostage in Baghdad told ABC's Ted Koppel, "we want you to tell the President of the United States that we think he's doing the right thing." (ABC 8/15)

Policy Put-Downs

Despite the networks' balanced treatment of Bush, U.S. Gulf policy received mostly failing grades. Overall, 63 percent of sources made negative comments about U.S. policies,

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while 37 percent supported them. Even among U.S. sources, fewer than half (45%) offered support for American policy, while an overwhelming 85 percent of non-U.S. sources (mainly Iraqi officials) voiced criticisms.

The deployment of U.S. troops to the Gulf was the most frequently debated policy action. During August and September, sources split about evenly, with 49 percent in favor of sending troops and 51 percent opposed. Typical was the comment of Sen. George Mitchell that, "American interests and our long-standing ties with Saudi Arabia make the President's decision to help defend Saudi Arabia the correct one." (CBS 8/8) By contrast, three out of four sources (76%) criticized the second deployment in November. Former Navy Secretary James Webb complained, "The President's error in sending too many troops should not be compounded by a further error of using them in a premature, unprovoked ground offensive." (NBC 11/29).

Rating U.S. Gulf Policy

News Sources	% Positive Ratings
Administration	n=47 70%
Congress	n=31 19%
Reporters	n=27 63%
Other U.S.	n=94 34%
Iraqi	n=32 3%
Other Foreign	n=39 26%

Note: Opinion by sources on ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news, 8/2 through 11/30

(61%) presented viewpoints against U.S. military action. Only 18 percent of sources came out unequivocally against a war, however; the other 43 percent provided some sort of partial or qualified anti-war statement. The latter group argued for giving sanctions more time to work, stressed the dire consequences of war, etc. For example, Mikhail Gorbachev reportedly told George Bush, "What's the rush? There is always plenty of time to go to war." (NBC, 11/19)

In contrast, only 13 percent of sources firmly supported the war option in November, while another 26 percent provided qualified support for military action. These latter sources stressed the various justifications for a war against Iraq. For example, Secretary of State James Baker stated that, "We will not let Saddam Hussein's aggression stand, and that requires putting ourselves in a position to use force, if that becomes necessary." (CBS 11/10)

[UPDATE: On the eve of war the debate became both more balanced and more polarized. Between January 1 and January 15, 56 percent of sources provided anti-war viewpoints, and most of those were firmly anti-war. Similarly, most of the 44 percent who supported the war were firm supporters. Although the House and Senate voted to authorize the use of force, 80 percent of congressional sources quoted were anti-war.]

Saddam Bombs

The chief villain in the crisis was Saddam Hussein. Among Saddam's 216 evaluations, 86 percent were negative. Most of his support came from Iraqis, Jordanians, and Palestinians. Moreover, one in eight criticisms (27 in all) went beyond the bounds of normal political discourse to portray Saddam as criminal or evil. For example, Senator Alfonse D'Amato called Saddam, "the new Hitler." (CBS 8/2)

War and Peace

After the second troop deployment, the prospect of war became the primary focus of debate. In November, a majority of sources

Should We Go to War?

November, 1990

Anti-War	Pro-War
18% Total	43% Partial
	26% Partial
	13% Total

n=100

January, 1991

Anti-War	Pro-War
38% Total	18% Partial
	20% Partial
	25% Total

n=92

Note: Opinions by sources on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news.

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